"I WAS A COMPLETE FUCKING MESS WHEN 'OK COMPUTER' FINISHED"

And then things got *really* bad. Scarred by success to the point of creative paralysis, the new **Radiohead** album was always going to be a 'difficult' album for Thom Yorke, even by his standards. But no-one expected *this*. Self-indulgent catharsis or brilliantly realised *tour de force*? *NME*, the band and the man himself give their verdict on 'Kid A'…

Text: **James Oldham**
Thom Yorke interview: **Lauren Zoric**

"You have no-one to blame but yourselves and you know it."
Message on the sleeve of 'Kid A'

Having already been uniformly heralded as the most important record of its generation, 'OK Computer' was released on June 16, 1997. It took just six days for Thom Yorke to become disillusioned with it. On Saturday June 21, Radiohead played their biggest gig to date in front of 40,000 people at the RDS in Dublin, and it sent Yorke tumbling into an abyss of loathing and self-doubt.

There's a song on the forthcoming Radiohead album called 'How To Disappear Completely' that documents these emotions. Its key lines – *"I'm not here/This isn't happening"* – capture his mental state at that point, as well as offering a clue as to what happened as the rest of the promotional schedule unfolded. Yorke may claim now that all the plaudits didn't "mean a fucking thing", but clearly there was a price to pay.

"I had this thing for a while," he reveals, from the confines of a café on Oxford's Cowley Road, "where I was falling through trap doors all the time into oblivion – like acid flashbacks. I'd be talking to someone and then I'd be falling through the earth. It went on for months and months, and it was really weird. It was all happening towards the end of 'OK Computer'… the end of the 'promotional period'."

Were you unhappy?

"That sounds like an MTV question," he laughs. "I was a complete fucking mess when 'OK Computer' finished! I mean, really, really ill."

Do you know why?

"It was just going a certain way for a long, long, long time and not being able to stop or look back or consider where I was at all. This was for, like, ten years – not being able to really connect with anything. I was basically just becoming unhinged… completely unhinged."

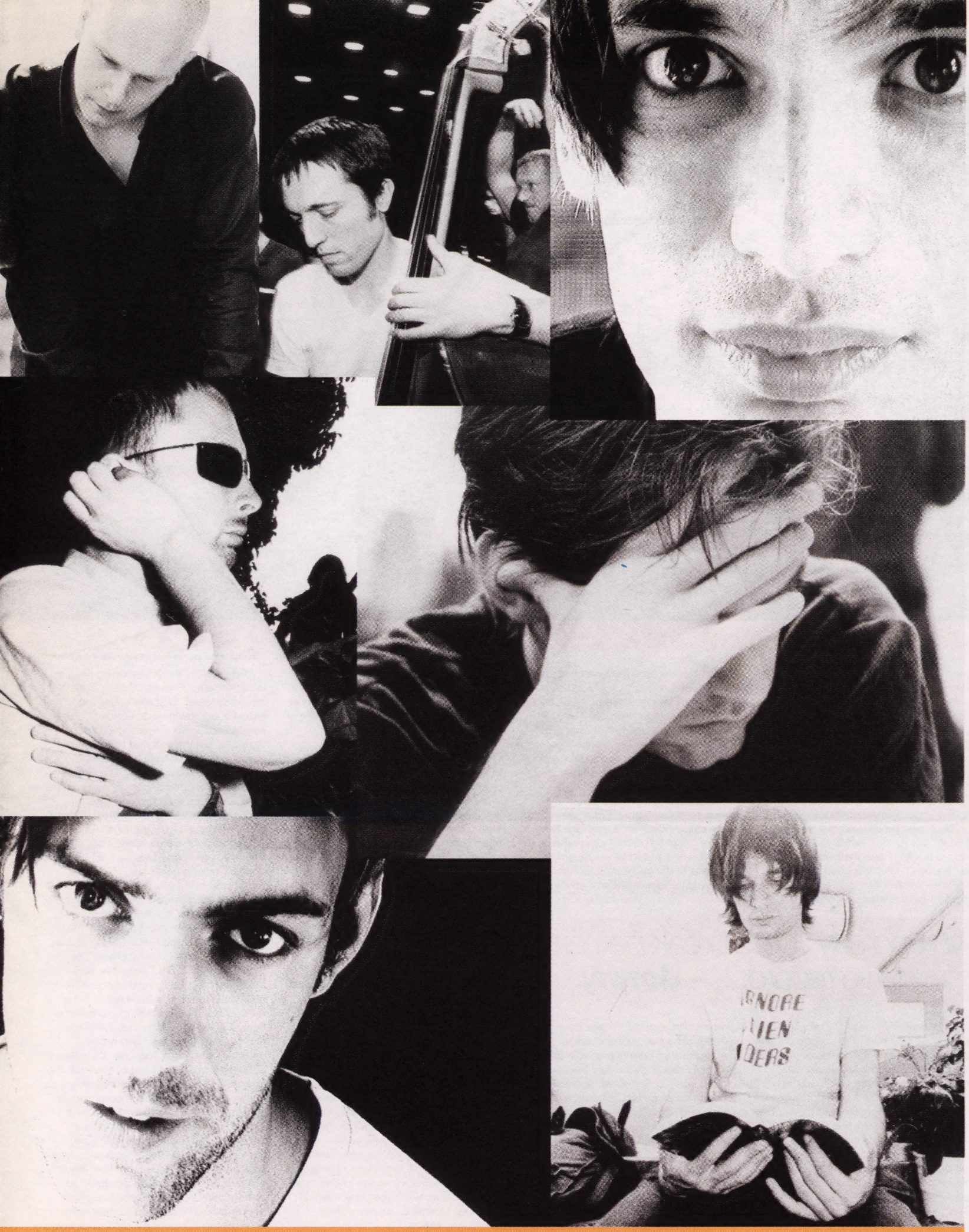
By the end of 1998, Yorke was close to collapse. Suffering from writer's block, he got "the horrors" whenever he picked up a guitar. The band, aware that something had to change, decided that from then on, the way they wrote, recorded and promoted their music had to change. They had to start again from scratch.

Next week, you'll be able to hear for yourself what that entailed. Three years on from 'OK Computer', 'Kid A' is the sound of a band struggling to surpass a record with a critical and cultural importance that is unmatched in recent memory. Recorded in four studios and three countries over a 12-month period rife with false starts and inter-band friction, the very least you can say about it is that it represents a complete and definite break with the past.

It trades the ambitious, heavily-treated guitar sounds of its predecessor for a skeletal electronic framework of meandering ambient clouds and fractured, subsumed vocals. Supported by brittle drum patterns and keening static, the songs drift by with minimal human input, utterly at odds with their live counterparts. If 'OK Computer' vividly articulated Yorke's anxieties, then 'Kid A' shrouds them in sonic fluff. It's almost as if Yorke has chosen to erase himself from the group completely.

A few tracks stand out – and it's no surprise they're the ones that are more propulsive and conventional in tone. The fuzz-bass and free-jazz histrionics of 'The National Anthem' recall the excesses of Primal Scream's 'Exterminator' LP, while the warped acoustics of 'Optimistic' push towards the sound of 'Isn't Anything'-era My Bloody Valentine, but these are exceptions within the general electronic haze. It might be the record Radiohead had to make, but it won't necessarily be a record you'll want to listen to. Although the rest of the band dispute it, 'Kid A' is very much the sound of Thom Yorke working through his own neuroses. For better or worse, it's his record.

By the time Radiohead entered the Guillame Tell studio in Paris at the start of January 1999, Yorke had already begun to worry that 'OK Computer' was not the radical new dawn



Here's looking at you, 'Kid A': Radiohead, perpetrators of the most confusing album of the year

critics had purported it to be. Worse, rehearsals for the new record were going terribly.

"After a while you just hear a sound," Yorke explains now, "and it doesn't matter what you do, you're not going to respond to it even though that's what you think you should be doing and it's what you've always done. When you get to that point, it feels like the ground is being pulled out from beneath you and you're just falling through space. It's a fucking nightmare."

A change of approach was vital, and it was Yorke – still crippled by writer's block – who instigated it. Having begun to immerse himself in the avant-electronica of Warp artists such as Autechre and Aphex Twin, he began to bring in demos that were little more than drum loops or found sounds, and the band would have to build something around them. He insists it wasn't just an arbitrary shift towards a more electronic sound.

"I could so easily find myself beating myself up about having played guitar music," he sighs. "'Oh no, it's all completely fucking shit', but ultimately it's just not true. I sort of worry that people will think that within my neurosis about what we've done in the past I've gone off and said, 'We must be electronic', but that wasn't the point in what I was doing. I'm sure certain people will see it like that…"

Certainly, the rest of the band were unsure about this new approach.

"When people say you're doing something radical in rock or dance music I'm not sure how special that is," confides guitarist Jonny Greenwood. "What we do is so old-fashioned. It's like trying to do something innovative in tap-dancing. As a motivation, it's irrelevant. We don't sit down and say, 'Let's break barriers.' We just copy our favourite records."

Feed into that guitarist Ed O'Brien's comment that he just wanted to make an album of three-minute guitar songs and bassist Colin Greenwood's confession that he doesn't really "know anything about the Aphex Twin", and you can see why there were tensions. But despite the fact that Yorke was obviously driving proceedings to a greater extent than ever before (even though he's always been sole songwriter), everyone is at great pains to stress that 'Kid A' isn't just a glorified solo record.

"It's a return to when we were at school," argues Colin, "and we couldn't play our instruments very well and we just picked up what we could. It's fine. Thom played some amazing bass on the record, everyone contributed and no-one took it

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"We've put a record out that's taking things a little bit further, and we hope people have the patience to deal with" – Colin

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

The five records that shaped 'Kid A'

Charles Mingus

The Complete Town Hall Concert *(Blue Note, 1962)*

A recording of a live fiasco. Mingus was meant to have scored music for a brass ensemble, but didn't manage it in time. The result is a collision of desperate jamming and random applause. Radiohead's inspiration for the finale of 'The National Anthem'.

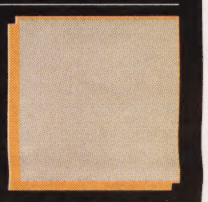
Miles Davis

Bitches Brew *(Columbia, (1970)*

It's not so much the sound of this record as the way it was made that fascinates Radiohead. Towards the end of the '60s, Davis had begun to experiment with recording techniques, instead of starting with a set piece in mind, he would record different fragments then edit them together. 'Kid A' was almost entirely constructed in this way.

Autechre

Tri Repetae *(Warp, 1996)*



A Warp cornerstone since 1994, Rob Brown and Sean Booth aren't just faceless: they seemingly have no physical form whatsoever. Given 'Kid A' features a song called 'How To Disappear Completely', you can see why this mechanical purity should appeal to the deconstructed Radiohead. This double album, 'Tri Repetae' shows Autechre exploring the whole spectrum of the uncanny.

Aphex Twin

I Care Because You Do *(Warp, 1996)*

Already ensconced as avant-bleep king, Richard James' 'I Care Because You Do' is often considered his most coherent recording. Featuring classic single 'Ventolin', it veers from abrasive to melodic to inexplicably terrifying. While Radiohead would baulk at calling a track 'Come On You Slags', the distorted chime of 'Kid A' and diseased disco of 'Idioteque' are clearly under the James influence.

Radiohead

OK Computer *(Parlophone, 1997)*

An influence in the sense that the band were determined 'Kid A' wouldn't sound anything like it. Jonny Greenwood's myriad guitar effects are replaced by a more ambitious, electronic framework and Thom Yorke's voice is conspicuous by its absence from much of 'Kid A'.

James Oldham/Victoria Segal

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easy, but there was a lot of pain in making it. Personally, I've come out of it feeling excited and grateful about the whole experience. The only reason you go through all this shit is because you're looking for new things to inspire you."

It's a sentiment that Jonny echoes.

"No, that's not true," he says of the 'Thom's solo album' accusation. "You can argue that for maybe one or two songs in the whole sessions and that's it."

Despite their protests to the contrary, there were problems. Paris was a wash-out, and in March 1999 they moved to Medley Studios in Copenhagen. There, they began to work on fragments of songs – and while the other band members struggled with the new methodology (Thom claims the songs on the new record weren't written, they were "edited"), long-standing producer Nigel Godrich aired his doubts.

"I think he thought I'd lost my marbles," states Yorke bluntly. "Because he didn't understand why, if we had such a strength in one thing, why the fuck we'd want to do something else."

What did you say to him?

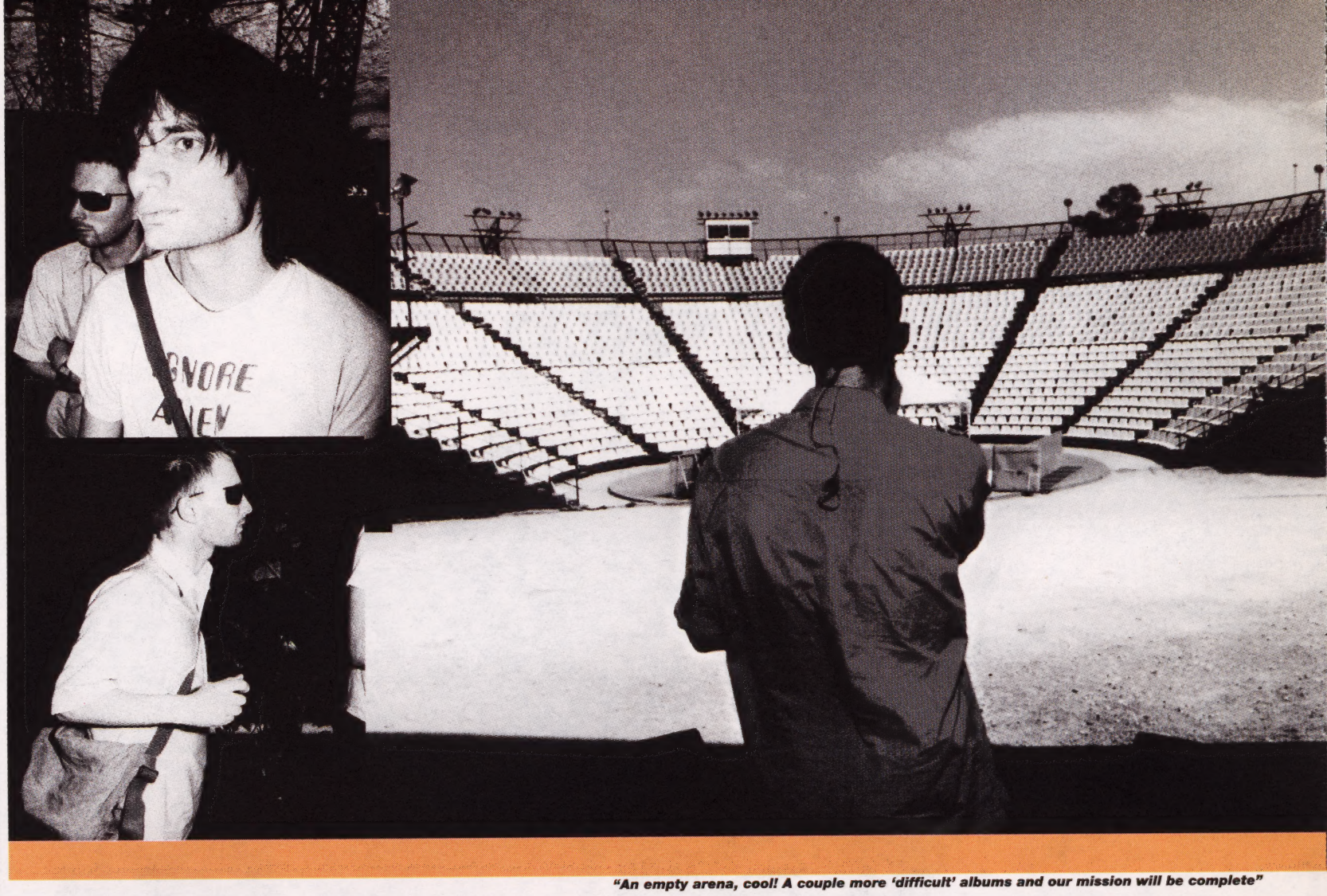
"At the same time he trusted me to have an idea of what I wanted even though he didn't understand at the time what the bloody hell it was. But basically *(for me)*, all it was was frustration, not getting off on anything that we'd normally do. So it wasn't like I was even trying to prove anything, it was just, 'Well this isn't fucking working for me. We have to do something else.'"

Little by little, the band settled into their new working pattern. By April, though, they'd moved again, this time to Batsford Park in Gloucestershire – they had now accumulated upwards of 60 incomplete songs.

"The truth is," explains Jonny, "that it was a difficult process to get going, but once we were up and running, it started going too well, and we started recording good song after good song, and it became difficult to stop, which is partly why we've got so much material recorded, and partly why it's taken so long."

Parallel to the album's musical construction, Yorke also began to work on its lyrics. A dispatch on Radiohead's website claimed he had "had enough of dwelling in *(his)* existential – and now highly profitable – angst", the hint being that 'Kid A' was to represent a more political direction. As it is, the lyrics – like the record as a whole – are tied in with the period in the immediate aftermath of 'OK Computer' – and fear constitutes one of the main themes.

"It's fear of dying, actually," he smiles. "It's a 30 thing. Most men hit 30 and think, 'Oh my God, I'm not actually immortal.' There's definitely fear of dying on 'Kid A'. I have this house down by the sea and the landscape around it is really harsh and I used to just go off for the whole day walking and just feel totally like nothing. It's just corny stuff, and when you sit down and talk about it, it all just sounds like complete bollocks."



"An empty arena, cool! A couple more 'difficult' albums and our mission will be complete"

So much for ditching the existential angst, then. Yorke might be an avid supporter of the Drop The Debt campaign, as well as Amnesty International and the Free Tibet movement, but it's something he's unable – or unwilling – to incorporate in his songs. By the time the band had finished 'Kid A' in April 2000, the only political song he'd written for it ('You And Whose Army' – which the band played at their Royal Festival Hall show in London in July) was destined not to feature – a move that only added to the insularity of the whole project.

"We don't sit down and say, 'Let's break barriers'. We just copy our favourite records." – Jonny

That insularity was finally broken when Radiohead returned to the public domain in June this year with a series of gigs around the rim of the Mediterranean. Relaxed, and peppered with new material, these shows were positively received, and suggested that the band's re-entry into the real world wasn't destined to be too bumpy. The reviewers, your correspondent included, might have felt differently, however, if they'd realised how many of the songs unveiled (particularly, 'Knives Out' and 'Nothing To Fear') weren't actually going to make it onto the record.

The next time *NME* catches up with Radiohead, it's mid-August, and they've just played the first date of their British tour in Newport. The atmosphere onstage has changed markedly, with the chatty bonhomie of the summer having given way to something far nervier. The crowd too seem muted and confused by the new material. Meanwhile, in the press, stories have begun to circulate that 'Kid A' was going to be called 'ENC' (or 'Emperor's New Clothes'), but the record label refused to allow it. The band, however, seem oblivious to the gathering storm clouds.

"You'd be apprehensive if you were playing in front of your home audience," insists Colin equably. "There were nine to ten thousand people there tonight… We can't just play in pretty places in the south of France; that would be really crap. It was our first show, and we're trying to do everything differently with the sound and lights."

It hasn't made you apprehensive about the way 'Kid A' is going to be received then?

"Not really. We've lived with the music for about a year now and I still like it. If you're in a band and you become very professional and slick, I think you have to pull the rug out in order to survive. Thom was saying tonight when he came off that he really enjoyed it, because there were moments of chaos and frenzy and doubt and success and failure, all happening in an hour-and-a-half. We don't want boredom to set in."

Jonny too is optimistic: "My experience of the album from having given it to friends, is that after hearing it once there's two songs that you really like, but the more you hear it, the other songs start to take over. Hopefully, your relationship with the album will change. Different songs will make sense after a period of time."

What about all the songs that didn't make it onto 'Kid A'? You seem to have deliberately left off all the catchy ones.

Colin shifts in his seat.

"When we did 'OK Computer'," he sighs, "the first single we released was 'Paranoid Android', which was six-and-a-half minutes long, and what I hope we've done with 'Kid A' is what we did with 'Paranoid Android'. We've put a record out that's taking things a little bit further, and we hope people have the patience to deal with, and then next year we'll put out more music that we've been playing live, and that people will be prepared for. If you want to hear songs like 'Knives Out', you can come and hear us play it and then we'll release it in March next year."

In light of the fact that people understand the difficulties surrounding the making of this record, and the fact that it represents a massive stylistic shift in your sound, don't you think it would have been better to do more press explaining all this?

"Do you feel like you're being jilted or left at the altar?" laughs Colin. "There's no axe to grind. Isn't this better than sitting in a hotel in north London? (*We're currently sitting in a freezing kitchen in South Wales*) We're trying to be more open and less confrontational."

"I think we realised with 'The Bends' and 'OK Computer'," concludes drummer Phil Selway, as their tour manager beckons them away, "there was an awful lot of energy going into things like interviews, which was taking time away from the really important parts of being in a band, making music and the whole visual side of it. We're not putting two fingers up at anybody, we're just trying to find a balance at the moment, and we may well have not got it right yet."

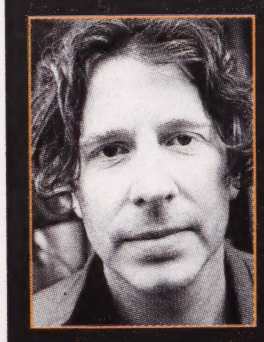
The balance that Phil is talking about doesn't just extend to the press. The fact is that following 'OK Computer' was always going to be a near impossible task, and Radiohead have opted for a route which, first and foremost, ensures their survival. 'Kid A' sounds like what it is: a record that's been slowly and painstakingly edited together. It's a brave, but flawed affair. It attempts to mimic the arhythmic sounds of Autechre and Aphex Twin, but ends up mired in compromise.

Aphex Twin works outside the music industry, releasing records when and where he wants, under his name and others. If Radiohead had wanted to they could have followed suit. As it is, they're still tied to the rock band aesthetic, still determined to play gigs and trade on personalities. Under their current set-up, all attempts at electronic radicalism come across as diluted and arbitrary.

Worse, it's arguable that they've missed the point about what made them so special in the first place. 'OK Computer' wasn't fantastic because it was radical sonically, but because the quality of songwriting was exceptional. 'Kid A' sees them abdicating that responsibility, as if Thom was frightened he couldn't reach the same standard again (hence the exclusion of all the actual 'songs').

Making experimental music is the easy way out. For Radiohead, and in particular Thom Yorke, it seems to have been the only way. Time will judge it. But right now, 'Kid A' has the ring of a lengthy, over-analysed mistake.

"I DON'T THINK APHEX WOULD EVEN LISTEN TO IT"
Warp Records co-founder Rob Mitchell has his say



What do you think of 'Kid A'?

"I think the album's excellent. It doesn't sound gratuitously electronic to me, it sounds like they've properly immersed themselves in this music. It's an honest interpretation of those influences. Tracks like 'Idioteque' are fine examples of a great bond between a superb voice and a great electronic backing track.

"It's very brave for a band like Radiohead to do something like this, because a lot of people are going to react badly to it, but maybe one day you might look at it the same way you look at *(David Bowie's)* 'Heroes' or 'Low', because a lot of people didn't appreciate his change of direction when he made it, but now those records are probably regarded as his finest."

Is it as radical as the records Warp release?

"No, but Autechre and Aphex Twin are incredibly pure about what they do; they listen to virtually nothing but experimental music and because of that they're closer to the source. Having said that, what Radiohead have done is totally authentic. To me, it's more personal and immediate than 'OK Computer'."

What do you think Autechre and the Aphex Twin would make of it?

"I don't think Aphex would even listen to it, to be honest. He doesn't really listen to anything that's got a rock edge to it. I wouldn't like to say whether Autechre would like it or not."

Is it true they were asked to support Radiohead and refused?

"Yes, that's true. I don't think it's because they didn't like Radiohead, I think it's because they didn't think it was the right thing to do."

Is imitation the sincerest form of flattery?

"All music has its roots somewhere. It's definitely more flattering coming from Radiohead than anyone else. We get lots of bands phoning up asking whether Autechre would fancy producing them, and obviously they wouldn't. Most of the bands they probably wouldn't even share a drink with, but Radiohead command much more respect."

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